

Ambedkarite Perspectives on Inclusivity in Sports: Traditional Barriers and Modern Policy

Salve, Kunal

Assistant Professor, Dept. Of Sports, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, College of Arts and Commerce,
Nagsenvana, Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar

Kabuliwale, Sham Devichandji

Associate Professor, Bharat College of Physical Education, Jalna

Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of Ambedkarite thought in understanding and advancing inclusivity within contemporary Indian sports. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste-based exclusion and his vision of social democracy offer a powerful framework for analysing persistent inequalities in sports participation, access, and representation. Although India has made significant progress in modern sports science and policy, traditional social structures continue to influence the distribution of opportunities, especially among marginalized communities. The paper traces historical barriers rooted in caste hierarchies, occupational segregation, and restricted access to public spaces, highlighting how these limitations shaped the sporting prospects of oppressed groups. Drawing from Ambedkar's emphasis on equality, fraternity, and constitutional morality, the study evaluates current policies such as the Sports Authority of India (SAI) schemes, reservation in government sports institutions, and grassroots development initiatives. It argues that while modern interventions have improved visibility and participation, deeper structural reforms are still needed to ensure genuine inclusivity. Through a socio-cultural and policy-based analysis, the paper proposes an Ambedkarite model of sports inclusion that prioritizes dignity, representation, and equitable resource distribution. The study ultimately demonstrates that

integrating Ambedkarite philosophy into sports science and governance can create a more just sporting ecosystem that aligns with constitutional values and promotes equal opportunities for all.

Keywords: Ambedkarite philosophy, Inclusivity in sports, Caste and sports, social justice, Sports policy.

Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual legacy offers a powerful lens for examining social inclusion in modern India, particularly within institutions that shape public life such as education, governance, and sports. Ambedkar argued that equality must be understood not only as a constitutional principle but as a social ethic that governs everyday interaction and access to opportunities (Ambedkar, 2014). He insisted that without the annihilation of caste-based hierarchies, no domain of Indian society could achieve genuine democratization. His interpretation of equality was inseparable from the idea of dignity, which he defined as the inherent worth of every human being, irrespective of caste, class, or cultural identity (Zelliot, 2004). This moral dimension is crucial in the context of sports, where participation, recognition, and mobility are often shaped by socio-economic backgrounds and long-standing cultural prejudices.

Ambedkar's concept of social democracy anchored in liberty, equality, and fraternity further provides an ethical foundation for evaluating inclusivity in sports. He saw social democracy as a way of life rather than merely a political arrangement, urging institutions to cultivate mutual respect, fairness, and collective responsibility (Omvedt, 1994). These values challenge the persistence of social exclusion and occupational segregation that historically limited the involvement of Dalits, tribal communities, and marginalized groups in physical culture and organized sports. Modern sports culture, though increasingly professionalized and globalized, continues to reflect inequalities rooted in caste, class, and access to public resources.

The relevance of Ambedkarite thought becomes clear when examining contemporary debates on equity in sports participation. Scholars have highlighted that sports ecosystems ranging from grassroots training facilities to elite athletic institutions often reproduce wider social inequities,

thereby calling for a justice-oriented framework that aligns with Ambedkar's principles (Bairner, 2015). By integrating Ambedkar's ideas, sports governance can shift from a performance-focused model to one that prioritizes inclusive development, democratic participation, and human dignity. Thus, Ambedkarite philosophy not only illuminates the social barriers embedded within Indian sports but also provides a transformative pathway toward building an equitable and socially responsible sporting culture.

Traditional Barriers to Sports Participation in India

The landscape of sports participation in India has long been shaped by entrenched social hierarchies, particularly caste norms that regulated access to public spaces, physical mobility, and social interaction. Historically, dominant-caste communities controlled key physical culture institutions such as akhadas, gymnasiums, wrestling pits, and temple courtyards, while Dalits and other lower castes were systematically excluded from these spaces through customary rules and ritual restrictions (Guru, 2009). Such restrictions were not merely spatial but also ideological, as caste order constructed lower-caste bodies as polluted, inferior, or lacking discipline, thereby discouraging their engagement with organized physical activities (Jaffrelot, 2005). These exclusions prevented marginalized communities from entering early pathways of athletic training, limiting their chances of progressing into competitive sports.

The marginalization of Dalits, Adivasis, and backward communities also stems from deeply embedded occupational roles and cultural stereotypes. Dalit communities often performed physically demanding labour such as agricultural tasks, sanitation work, leatherwork, or construction but these activities were never recognized as forms of physical skill or endurance that could translate into sports participation (Shah et al., 2006). Instead, their labour was stigmatized, rendering them invisible within mainstream sports culture. Similarly, Adivasi groups, despite possessing rich traditions of indigenous games like archery, running, and wrestling, faced limited recognition or institutional support due to their social and geographical isolation. The lack of integration of indigenous sporting practices into national sports frameworks further marginalized these communities, denying them opportunities for representation at regional, national, or international levels.

Socio-economic barriers have had an equally profound impact on access to sports. Marginalized communities often experience chronic poverty, limited access to nutrition, inadequate schooling, and absence of sports equipment or safe play spaces factors that critically determine athletic development (Nandy, 2012). While dominant-caste and urban families frequently invest in coaching academies, sports clubs, and specialized training, disadvantaged communities struggle even to meet basic survival needs, making sports appear as a distant or unattainable pursuit. Additionally, early school dropout rates among Dalit and tribal children driven by discrimination, economic hardship, or lack of institutional support reduce their exposure to school-based sports programs that serve as important nurturing grounds for young athletes.

Cultural stigma also plays a significant role. Social stereotypes portraying competitive sports as domains of upper-caste or urban masculinity discourage participation among marginalized youth, while discriminatory practices such as biased selection, unequal allocation of resources, or humiliating treatment in sports institutions further deter their involvement (Nagar, 2018). Even in contemporary India, these structural inequalities manifest in unequal representation in state teams, limited access to scholarships, and disparities in sports infrastructure between privileged and marginalized regions (Bairner, 2015). As a result, the historical legacy of caste, social exclusion, and economic deprivation continues to shape who can participate, compete, and succeed in Indian sports.

Modern Sports Policies and Inclusion Efforts

Since the 2010s the Government of India has launched a suite of flagship programmes aimed at widening the base of athletic participation and professionalizing sport most notably the Khelo India national programme for grassroots development and talent identification, and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) for high-performance athletes (Khelo India, n.d.; Sports Authority of India, n.d.). Khelo India seeks to build infrastructure, organize mass participation events (youth games and university games), and provide scholarships to young talent, while TOPS channels targeted scientific support, foreign exposure, and stipends to elite athletes preparing for global competitions (Khelo India, n.d.; Sports Authority of India, n.d.). Complementary measures include reservation/quotas for sportspersons in government recruitment and specific welfare funds and

pension schemes for former athletes, all intended to make sports a viable career pathway (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, n.d.; DOPT compilation, 2024).

These initiatives have produced visible achievements: improved grassroots competitions, wider scouting through school- and district-level events, and better performance on international podiums outcomes that indicate progress in talent identification and elite support (PIB, 2024). Targeted tribal and disadvantaged-area programmes and recent Khelo India components explicitly emphasize inclusiveness, nutrition, and access to coaching for marginalized communities (PIB, 2025). However, significant gaps remain. Structural inequities uneven distribution of facilities, urban–rural and state-level disparities, opaque selection processes, and limited investment in community-level coaching continue to restrict access for Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged youth (Khelo India tender/KIRTI descriptions; SAI documents). Moreover, while reservations and sports quotas create pathways into government employment, they do not automatically address early-stage exclusion from play spaces, persistent social stigma, or the lack of culturally sensitive outreach that would make sports participation socially acceptable and sustainable for oppressed communities (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, n.d.; DOPT, 2024).

An Ambedkarite analysis foregrounds these persistent gaps as manifestations of deeper structural injustices: policy measures that focus on elite performance or discrete welfare benefits, without concomitant social transformation, risk reinforcing meritocratic narratives that ignore unequal starting points. From an Ambedkarite standpoint, genuine inclusion requires not only resources and quotas but active redistribution of opportunities, dignity-affirming interventions, and constitutional morality embedded in implementation for example, prioritizing investments in public play spaces in historically excluded localities, culturally contextual talent pathways (recognizing indigenous games), anti-discrimination training for coaches and administrators, and transparent, community-anchored selection mechanisms (Ambedkar, 2014; Omvedt, 1994). In short, contemporary policies provide useful tools, but an Ambedkarite framework insists on structural reform and dignity-centered implementation if sports are to become an arena of genuine social equality rather than another site where historical privileges reassert themselves.

Towards an Ambedkarite Model of Inclusive Sports

Building an Ambedkarite model of inclusive sports requires centering the principles of equality, representation, and constitutional morality in both policy and practice. Ambedkar's insistence that democracy must be grounded in social equality, not merely political rights, provides a foundational lens for reimagining sports as a space where dignity and opportunity are accessible to all (Ambedkar, 2014). Constitutional morality emphasizing justice, fraternity, and the protection of marginalized groups demands that sports institutions actively dismantle caste, class, and gender hierarchies rather than passively replicate them (Zelliot, 2004). An Ambedkarite sports framework thus shifts the focus from competitive achievement alone to the creation of conditions where every individual, regardless of socio-economic position, can meaningfully participate.

Structural reforms are central to this transformation. First, equitable resource distribution must be institutionalized by prioritizing public investment in marginalized localities, including Dalit and Adivasi settlements, rural regions, and urban slums. This includes developing community-owned playfields, accessible coaching centers, and inclusive training hubs that counter the historical exclusion of oppressed communities (Guru, 2009). Second, representation in decision-making sports federations, selection committees, coaching bodies, and athlete development programs must reflect India's social diversity, ensuring that marginalized groups have a voice in governance. Third, national and state sports curricula should incorporate education on caste equality, social justice, and anti-discrimination practices, enabling coaches, administrators, and athletes to internalize ethical values aligned with Ambedkarite thought (Omvedt, 1994).

At the grassroots level, empowerment strategies should focus on integrating indigenous games, community sports festivals, and school-based programs designed to identify talent without structural bias. Scholarships and long-term athlete development schemes must include social justice criteria so that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds receive sustained support. Transparent selection processes, community monitoring, and anti-discrimination mechanisms can further ensure fairness. An Ambedkarite model ultimately envisions sports as a tool of social transformation one that redistributes opportunities, challenges stigma, and cultivates fraternity through shared physical and cultural participation. By embedding equality at every stage of the

sporting ecosystem, this framework offers a pathway toward a truly democratic and socially just sports culture in India.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Ambedkarite principles equality, dignity, representation, and constitutional morality offer a powerful framework for rethinking inclusive sports development in India. By tracing historical barriers shaped by caste, social hierarchy, and structural inequality, the study highlights how access to sports has long mirrored broader patterns of social exclusion. Modern policies such as Khelo India and SAI initiatives have expanded opportunities, yet their effectiveness remains limited when deeper social inequities and discriminatory practices persist. The Ambedkarite lens ties these gaps to entrenched power structures, asserting that meaningful inclusion requires transforming the social foundations on which sports institutions operate.

True democratization of sports, therefore, depends on structural change oriented toward social justice. This includes equitable distribution of resources, anti-discriminatory governance, diverse representation in decision-making bodies, and sustained support for marginalized communities. Ambedkar's vision of social democracy based on liberty, equality, and fraternity calls for sports to function not only as a site of physical excellence but also as a platform for empowerment, dignity, and collective belonging.

Embedding Ambedkar's ideals into sports policy, institutional governance, and community engagement can create a sporting culture that reflects the constitutional promise of justice and equality. Such a model recognizes sports as a transformative force capable of challenging historical injustices, nurturing inclusive identities, and promoting social harmony. Ultimately, an Ambedkarite approach to sports development aspires to build a future where participation and success are determined not by birth or social status but by opportunity, aspiration, and human potential.

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Received: Jan 02, 2026

Accepted: Feb 24, 2026

Published: Apr 22, 2026

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